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ABSTRACT

This brief report applies research on self-determination to suggestions for helping students with disabilities make a successful transition from school to adult life. First, it defines the concept of self-determination and considers how self-determination is learned. It summarizes research supporting the view that self-determination in high school is related to positive transition outcomes. Student involvement in his/her individualized education program process is encouraged and sources of self-determination curricula are noted. Principles of promoting self-determination in youth with disabilities are listed and include: (1) promote choice making; (2) encourage exploration of possibilities; (3) promote reasonable risk taking; (4) encourage problem solving; (5) promote self advocacy; (6) facilitate development of self-esteem; (7) develop goal setting and planning skills; and (8) help youth understand their disabilities. References include curricula and Web sites. (Contains 27 references.) (DB)

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Self-Determination: Supporting Successful Transition
NCSET Research to Practice Brief

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Creating Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

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Self-Determination: Supporting Successful Transition

By Christine D. Bremer, Mera Kachgal, and Kris Schoeller

Introduction

Self-determination is a concept reflecting the belief that all individuals have the right to direct their own lives. Students who have self-determination skills have a stronger chance of being successful in making the transition to adulthood, including employment and independence (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). Starting with the 1990 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (P.L. 101-476), transition services must be based on student needs and take into account student interests and preferences. To accomplish this goal, students must be prepared to participate in planning for their future. Several curricula have been developed to address the need for self-determination skills among adolescents, including the skills needed to take control of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. Selected curricula are identified and described at the end of this brief.

What is Self-Determination?

Self-determination "encompasses concepts such as free will, civil and human rights, freedom of choice, independence, personal agency, self-direction, and individual responsibility" (University of Illinois at Chicago National Research & Training Center, 2002). Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) is based on the assumption that people have inborn tendencies to grow and develop psychologically, to strive to master challenges in the environment, and to integrate experience into self-concept. This theory holds that these human tendencies are fully expressed only within a supportive social context. That is, self-determination is not achieved simply because an individual has certain requisite knowledge and skills; it is also important that key people and institutions in the person's life provide a context conducive to self-determination. Abery and Stancliffe (1996) have noted that even when youth have excellent self-determination skills, they can be thwarted in their efforts to become self-determined by people and institutions that present barriers or fail to provide needed supports.

Self-determination "refers to the attitudes and abilities required to act as the primary causal agent in one's life and to make choices regarding one's actions free from undue external influence or interference" (Wehmeyer, 1992, p. 305). A person's actions are self-determined if the person acts autonomously, regulates his or her own behavior, initiates and responds to events in a manner indicating psychological empowerment, and behaves in a manner that is self-realizing. That is, the person acts in ways that make positive use of knowledge and understand-

ing about his or her own characteristics, strengths, and limitations (Wehmeyer, Kelchner, & Richards, 1996). A self-determined person is one who sets goals, makes decisions, sees options, solves problems, speaks up for himself or herself, understands what supports are needed for success, and knows how to evaluate outcomes (Martin & Marshall, 1996).

How is Self-Determination Learned?

The capabilities needed to become self-determined are most effectively learned through real-world experience, which inherently involves taking risks, making mistakes, and reflecting on outcomes. These experiences help a young person test his or her strengths and limitations and identify appropriate short- and long-term goals. In addition to real-world experience, youth benefit from open, supportive acknowledgement and discussion of their disability. Too often families, teachers, and other well-intentioned people protect youth with disabilities from making mistakes and avoid discussing the details and potential ramifications of the youth's disability. Instead, they focus on the positive and steer the youth away from many experiences where there is a potential for failure. However, in order to direct their own futures, youth need to know themselves and understand how their disability might affect academic learning, relationships, employment, participation in their communities, and need for supports. With this knowledge, they are better positioned to develop plans, make decisions, and learn from experience. There can be a fine line, however, between experiencing the real world and losing one's sense of personal empowerment. As Wehmeyer and Kelchner (1996) note:

> *Failure experiences are only learning experiences if they are mitigated. That is, students only learn from failure when they have the opportunity to try the experience again with a different strategy or level of intensity and succeed... It is quite possible that the school experiences of students with cognitive disabilities contain a unique mix of overprotection and failure experiences that contribute to external perceptions of control. (p. 26)*

Supporting a young person in becoming self-determined is not about simply removing limits and structure. It is, rather, about providing opportunities so a young person can make meaningful decisions about his or her own future. For families, teachers, and other adults, supporting self-determination requires being open to new possibilities and taking seriously youths' dreams for the future.

Research on Self-Determination

Research has supported the view that self-determination in high school is related to positive transition outcomes. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) conducted a study in which they followed up on a group of students who had graduated from high school. The study included 80 students ages 17 to 22 with mental retardation or learning disabilities. Self-determination data were collected prior to their high school exit, using a self-report measure called The Arc's Self-Determination Scale (Wehmeyer & Kelchner, 1995), a 72-item self-report measure that includes a score for global self-determination and subscales for individual autonomy, self-regulation, psychological empowerment, and self-realization. Adult outcomes for the students were assessed using a scale completed by parents.

Nearly one year after graduation, findings showed that students whose scores in high school indicated a higher level of self-determination were more likely to have experienced a greater number of positive adult outcomes, including a higher likelihood of being employed and earning more per hour than those who were not self-determined (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997, p. 245). The study showed a "consistent trend characterized by self-determined youth doing better than their peers one year out of school. Members of the high self-determination group were more likely to have expressed a preference to live outside the family home, have a savings or checking account, and be employed for pay" (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997, p. 253).

Self-Determination and the Individualized Education Program

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) supports greater self-determination on the part of students with disabilities by mandating their involvement in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process. One means of fostering self-determination is to encourage students to lead their IEP meetings whenever possible. This makes the program their own, and increases the likelihood that it will be carried out. Resources are available to

Promoting Self-Determination in Youth with Disabilities: Tips for Families and Professionals

Promote Choice Making

- Identify strengths, interests, and learning styles;
- Provide choices about clothing, social activities, family events, and methods of learning new information;
- Hold high expectations for youth;
- Teach youth about their disability;
- Involve children and youth in self-determination/self advocacy; opportunities in school, home, and community;
- Prepare children and youth for school meetings;
- Speak directly to children and youth;
- Involve children and youth in educational, medical, and family decisions;
- Allow for mistakes and natural consequences;
- Listen often to children and youth.

Encourage Exploration of Possibilities

- Promote exploration of the world every day;
- Use personal, tactile, visual, and auditory methods for exploration;
- Identify young adult mentors with similar disabilities;
- Talk about future jobs, hobbies, and family lifestyles;
- Develop personal collages/scrap books based on interests and goals;
- Involve children and youth in service learning (4H, AmeriCorps, local volunteering).

Promote Reasonable Risk Taking

- Make choice maps listing risks, benefits, and consequences of choice;
- Build safety nets through family members, friends, schools, and others;
- Develop skills in problem solving;
- Develop skills in evaluating consequences.

Encourage Problem Solving

- Teach problem solving skills;
- Allow ownership of challenges and problems;
- Accept problems as part of healthy development;
- Hold family meetings to identify problems at home and in the community;
- Hold class meetings to identify problems in school;
- Allow children and youth to develop a list of self-identified consequences.

Promote Self Advocacy

- Encourage communication and self-representation;
- Praise all efforts of assertiveness and problem solving;
- Develop opportunities at home and in school for self-advocacy;
- Provide opportunities for leadership roles at home and in school;
- Encourage self-advocates to speak in class;
- Teach about appropriate accommodation needs;
- Practice ways to disclose disability and accommodation needs;
- Create opportunities to speak about the disability in school, home, church, business and community.

Facilitate Development of Self-Esteem

- Create a sense of belonging within schools and communities;
- Provide experiences for children and youth to use their talents;
- Provide opportunities to youth for contributing to their families, schools, and communities;
- Provide opportunities for individuality and independence;
- Identify caring adult mentors at home, school, church, or in the community;
- Model a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence.

Develop Goal Setting and Planning

- Teach children and youth family values, priorities, and goals;
- Make posters that reflect values and are age-appropriate;
- Define what a goal is and demonstrate the steps to reach a goal;
- Make a road map to mark the short-term identifiers as they work toward a goal;
- Support children and youth in developing values and goals;
- Discuss family history and culture—make a family tree;
- Be flexible in supporting youth to reach their goals; some days they may need much motivation and help; other days they may want to try alone.

Help Youth Understand Their Disabilites

- Develop a process that is directed by youth for self-identity: Who are you? What do you want? What are your challenges and barriers? What supports do you need?
- Direct children and youth to write an autobiography;
- Talk about the youth's disability;
- Talk about the youth's abilities;
- Involve children and youth in their IEP;
- Use good learning style inventories and transition assessments;
- Identify and utilize support systems for all people.

help with this process (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 2002a, 2002b).

Self-Determination Curricula

Dozens of curricula have been developed to enhance self-determination for students with disabilities. Wood, Test, Browder, Algozzine, and Karvonen (2000) developed a summary of available self-determination curricula, indicating the audience for each, the skills taught, the cost of the curriculum, and whether the curriculum has been field-tested. This document is available online at *http://www.uncc.edu/sdsp/sd_curricula.asp*. A list of readily available curricula that have been field-tested and address a range of needs is included in the Resources section of this Brief.

Conclusion

Self-determination helps youth with disabilities achieve positive adult outcomes. Several curricula are available to help students learn self-determination skills, and to help families support youth. Beyond youth and their families, others such as teachers, employers, and institutions also need to be committed to creating and maintaining an environment in which self-determination can take place. The result will be a measurable increase in self-sufficiency and, perhaps even more importantly, greater sense of purpose and satisfaction in adulthood.

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Resources: Curricula

Student-Led IEPs: A Guide for Student Involvement (Authors: M. McGahee, C. Mason, T. Wallace, and B. Jones)

Packed with practical ideas, forms and approaches, this publication provides you with suggestions for starting a student-led IEP program, helping students understand their IEPs, engaging students in developing IEPs, preparing students to participate in or lead an IEP meeting, and monitoring ongoing self-advocacy. For further information: The Council for Exceptional Children, 1110 North Glebe Road, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22201-5704. Phone: 888-232-7733. Fax: 703-264-9494. Web: *http://www.cec.sped.org/bk/catalog/iep.html*

Choice Maker Instructional Series (Authors: J. E. Martin, L. H. Marshall, L. Maxson, P. Jerman, W. Hughes, T. Miller, & T. McGill)

Choice Maker consists of three instructional packages that teach seven self-determination constructs. For further information: Sopris West, 4093 Specialty Place, Longmont, CO 80504. Phone: 303-651-2829. Web: *http://www.sopriswest.com/swstore/product.asp?sku=629*

NEXT S.T.E.P.: Student Transition and Educational Planning (Authors: A. S. Halpern, C. M. Herr, B. Doren, & N. K. Wolf)

For further information: Pro-Ed, 8700 Shoal Creek Boulevard, Austin, TX 78757. Phone: 800-897-3202. Web: *http://www.proedinc.com/store/index.php?mode=product_detail&id=9265*

Self-Determination for Youth with Disabilities: A Family Education Curriculum (Authors: B. Abery, K. Arndt, P. Greger, L. Tetu, A. Eggebeen, J. Barosko, A. Hinga, M. McBride, K. Peterson, & L. Rudrud)

This curriculum is designed for use with families, with the guidance of facilitators. For further information: Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, 102 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive SE, Minneapolis MN 55455. Phone: 612-624-4512. Web: *http://ici.umn.edu/products/curricula.html#self*

Steps to Self-Determination: A Curriculum to Help Adolescents Learn to Achieve their Goals (Authors: S. Field & A. Hoffman)

For further information: Council for Exceptional Children, 1110 North Glebe Road, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22201-5704. Phone: 888-232-7733. Web: *http://www.cec.sped.org/bk/catalog2/self.html*

Take Charge (for youth ages 12–15) and **Take Charge for the Future (for youth ages 15-20)** (Authors: L. Powers, R. Ellison, J. Matuszewski, R. Wilson, & A. Turner)

These two curricula are intended for students considered to be at-risk due to health challenges, physical/learning/emotional disabilities, and/or family/community stresses. For further information: Oregon Health Sciences University Center on Self-Determination, 3608 SE Powell Blvd., Portland, OR 97202. Phone: 503-232-9154. Web: *http://cdrc.ohsu.edu/selfdetermination/products2.html*

A Teacher's Guide to Implementing the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction: Adolescent Version (Authors: M. Wehmeyer, M. Agran, S. Palmer, D. Mithaug, & C. Blanchard)

For further information: The Arc of the United States, 500 E. Border Street, S-300 Arlington, TX 76010. Phone: 800-433-5255.

Whose Future is it, Anyway? A Student Directed Transition Process (Authors: M. Wehmeyer & M. Lawrence)

This curriculum is designed for middle school and high school age students with mild to moderate intellectual, developmental, or learning disabilities. For further information: The National Publications Desk, 2904 Valleyview Drive, Grapevine, TX 76051. Phone: 888-368-8009. Web: *http://www.thearcpub.com*

Resources: Web Sites

Center on Self-Determination, Oregon Health & Science University

Information about policies and practices that promote the self-determination of people with and without disabilities. Web: *http://cdrc.ohsu.edu/selfdetermination/*

Resources: Web Sites Cont.

Self-Determination Synthesis Project, University of North Carolina, Charlotte

Information about self-determination resources, including research references, curricula, Web links, and other materials. Includes links to many lesson plans. Web: *http://www.uncc.edu/sdsp*

Further Reading:

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